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ABSTRACT

Message biasing of upward communication in organizational hierarchies has been an ongoing concern of communication researchers. The purpose of this study was to analyze this distortion in actual message from subordinates to superiors in simulated situations and to determine the effects of favorable and unfavorable situations on message content. Subordinates of 66 supervisors from two large manufacturing companies were asked to compose messages for their superiors, given the following situations: Task related/favorable to the subordinate, task related/unfavorable to the subordinate, non-task related/favorable to the subordinate, non-task related unfavorable to the subordinate. Data were measured by independent judges for additions, deletions, and changes, as well as for overall subjective impression. As hypothesized, judges perceived more distortion in task related unfavorable situations. Surprisingly, in non-task related unfavorable situations, a low level of distortion was found. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is the "pratfall effect," that is, in the organizational setting one way to increase credibility is to admit to human error. Since the superior has less influence in the non-task situation, this presents the best opportunity for utilization of this strategy. (KS)

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DISTORTION OF SUBORDINATE TO SUPERIOR COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS[1]

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DISTORTION OF SUBORDINATE TO SUPERIOR COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS

The flow of communication upward in organizational hierarchies, whether actual or experimentally created, has long been a favorite variable for organizational communication researchers. The pervasive theme of this literature is that: (1) subordinates tend to distort information upward in a manner that pleases their superior; (2) subordinates tend to tell their superior what they want him to know; (3) subordinates tend to tell their superior what they think he wants to hear; and (4) subordinates tend to tell their superior things that reflect favorably on themselves and/or do not reflect negatively on themselves. Downs (1966) postulates that subordinates distort the information they pass upward to their superiors in the hierarchy: "Subordinates tend to exaggerate data that reflect favorably on themselves and to minimize those that reveal their own shortcomings" (p.77). Read (1962) suggests that pleasant matters are more likely to be communicated upward in a hierarchy, and that achievements are also more likely to be communicated upward than is information about errors or difficulties encountered at lower levels in the hierarchy.

Much of the existing empirical study of message distortion in hierarchies (whether actual or experimentally created) has focused on this upward biasing tendency. Kelley (1951) created experimental hierarchies (of college students in the laboratory) through which messages were sent. He found that members of low status groups sent more irrelevant messages and communicated more negative information than did high status members, and that the existence of the hierarchy had restraining effects upon criticism of persons at higher levels. Cohen (1958) also utilized experimentally created hierarchies, though he focused on messages sent by two low status groups (upward-mobile and non-mobile) to a high status

group. The low status, upward-mobile group sent fewer cirtical messages than did the low status, non-mobile group, though the non-mobile group communicated messages which guranteed their chances of being rated favorably by members of a high status group.

In a field study conducted in a large research organization, Mellinger (1956), found that concealment (evasiveness, complaincy, and/or aggressiveness) by the subordinate occured when there existed a relationship of distrust, especially when the superior distrusted the subordinate. Utilizing fifty-two superior-subordinate dyads selected from three industril organizations, Read (1962) examined interpersonal trust in addition to upward-mobility aspirations and perceived influence-of-supervisor in relation to accuracy of upward communication. Among other results, Read found that communication is less accurate under a low trust, high influence condition and that accuracy is inversely related to mobility needs of subordinates, but directly related to trust. In general, Read (1962) concluded:

> . . . individuals in power hierarchies tend to screen information passed upward, and to withhold or refrain from communicating information that is potentially threatening to the status of the communicator . . . . this tendancy prevails in informal, large scale organizations, is stronger among upwardly mobile members, and is strongly modified by the communicator's attitudes toward and those above him in the hierarchy (p. 14).

Athanassiades (1971, 1973) conducted a field study in two different organizations: a large state-wide university in the South, and a police department in a large Southern city. Faculty members were utilized as the sample in the university setting, and officers of the rank of sergeant or above in the police setting. His study examined the effects on upward communication and distortion of ascendance drive, security, and type of organizational structure. The university setting was considered to be an autonomous authority structure, one which allows the individual a great deal of freedom, without a strict hierarchical supervisorial reporting system. The police setting was considered to be a heteronomous authority structure, one which has a strict hierarchical, supervisorial

reporting system. Among other results, Athanassiades found that there was greater distortion in heteronomous organizations, and greater distortion by low secure individuals (though with higher confidence in the police setting than in the university setting). There was no support for his hypothesis that upward distortion of communication by itself would be related to the ascendance individuals; however, for the high secure group, high ascendance individuals did distort upward communication more than did low ascendance individuals. This relationship did not hold for the low secure group.

Sussman (1973) examined the relationship between message accuracy and trust, but from the perspective of the superior, not from that of the subordinate. He looked at the supervisor's perception of the accuracy of reception of subordinate's messages, rather than the message sending accuracy of subordinates, as had the other researchers. Among other results, Sussman found that superiors perceive messages favorable to the subordinate as less accurate than messages which are perceived as unfavorable to the subordinate.

Theoretically, there seems to be two reasons for this biasing tendency of upward communication in organizational hierarchies. The first as described by Campbell (1958), is the pervasive tendency of human links in a communication chain to distort information passed through that chain. Campbell provides, perhaps, the most cogent argument (supported by numerous experimental studies) as to the ubiquity of distortion or systematic error in the sequential processing and transmission of information by human beings in a communication system. This distortion effect is due in part to the number of different roles persons can occupy as links in the communication system. These roles include duplicatory transmission assignments, translation, and decision making functions. The most important roles in the present context are the decision-making functions, which include reductive coding or "reducing complex input into a simpler output language . . . "(Campbell p.337). It is this reductive coding which is one source

of distortion in any communication system.

The second theoretical basis for this biasing tendency is the power, authority, and status relationships built into the hierarchical nature of organizations. Rosen and Tesser (1972) speaking of a related, though quite different phenomenon, argue that:

> Such distortion to please or avoid distressing a target person is quite likely when the recipient of the message has the opportunity (in a continuing relationship), also the means (significant power to reward or punish the communicator), of acting back (p. 125).

In the organizational setting it is usually an individual's supervisor who has the continuing relationship and the power (as perceived by the subordinate) to provide punishments or rewards which may lead to message distortion: "Thus, the capacity of the superior to direct, reward or punish . . . creates the necessary conditions for the distortion of upward communication" (Athanassiades, 1972, p. 27, emphasis added). Campbell also spoke directly to the concept that power inherent in the hierarchy is an important source of distortion:

> The human transmitter is usually in the situation of transmitting the message to another human being. And as a rule this relationship will continue in the future and has reciprocal aspects, in which the recipient may be able to act back on the transmitter. In the typical situation, the transmitter's output may be expected to deviate from input in the direction of pleasing the recipient, avoiding causing distress, etc. This will be particularly true when the recipient has important power over the transmitter as in up-the-line communication in an administrative hierarchy (p. 351).

Not only is the power of the hierarchy a potential source of distortion, but the message itself is a potential source of power and is thus itself another potential source of distortion:

> Information is among other things a weapon and a defense. It can be shaped, changed, and in a myriad of ways utilized by an organizational member to achieve his ends, maximize his gains, and to weaken the position of his competitors within the same organization (Read, 1963, p. 8).

The present study was undertaken to analyze distortion in organizational hierarchies from two new perspectives: (1) to analyze actual messages written by

subordinates to superiors (though from simulated rather than real organizational situations); and (2) to analyze the effects of different types of situations about which messages can be written. Previous distortion studies in organizations have utilized disparity scores as a measure of distortion. Disparity scores involve the difference between two sets of responses on a paper and pencil test. Read used differences between superiors' and subordinates' responses about major organizational problems, Mellinger used differences in subordinates' responses and supervisors' predictions of subordinates' responses, and Athanassiades used differences in subordinates' confidential responses and subordinates' responses open to the view of their superiors. The present study utilized simulated situations from which subordinates composed actual messages to their supervisors.

The use of simulated situations also allowed for testing the effects of the type of situation from which the message was written. Simulated situations were created to reflect favorably or unfavorably on the subordinate or to reflect task related or non-task related matters. From previous research and theoretical literature, it is predicted that messages written about unfavorable situations will be more distorted than ones written from favorable situations. The favorable situation already puts the subordinate in a good light, while the unfavorable situation does not, thus there should be a greater tendency to distort messages about unfavorable situations. No predictions are made about the effect of task versus non-task related situations. Therefore the following research questions is posed: What is the effect on the distortion of the task relatedness of the situation from which a message is written?

Method

Subjects.

The data for this study were collected in the corporate headquarters of two large manufacturing companies. In compliance with the promise of anonymity, they will not be named. Supervisory-managerial personnel from the same level in both companies (n=27 and n=39) participated in the study. All available personnel

at this level participated in both organizations (though this was a nonrandom sample since some poeple at this level could not participate due to production demands in one of the companies).

Stimulus (simulated) situations.

The four final stimulus situations utilized for the message composition by the subordinates were, based upon pretesting, realistic, important, interesting, and had the appropriate favorability and task relatedness. The four situations, consistent with the theoretical foundation of this study, are as follows:

Situation #1: Task related/Favorable to the subordinate;

Situation #2: Task related/Unfavorable to the subordinate;

Situation #3: Non-task related/Favorable to the subordinate;

Situation #4: Non-task related/Unfavorable to the subordinate.

The stimulus situations were prepared so that each contained an equal number of identifiable items (14) and were approximately the same length. The basic facts of the situations were maintained for both companies, though details of the situations were altered to fit the specifics of each organization.

Participants were presented with the four stimulus situations from which they were instructed to write messages to their superiors. Presentation of the stimulus situations was counter-balanced to control for order effects. Writing the messages took the participants approximately an hour to an hour and one half.

Data analysis.

The dependent measures for this study were derived from the theoretical work of Campbell (1958) who posited three areas of distortion: (1) additions; (2) deletions; and (3) changes. Separate analyses were computed for "judged" and "actual" measures of message distortion. "Judged" message distortion analysis involved ratings by three judges of the messages written by the subordinates in comparison with the original stimulus situations. Two of the judges rated the messages consenually, while the third judge rated the messages separately from the other two. Judges used the following scales: favorability, deletions, additions,

internalization, and spologetic nature of the message. A separate scale was utilized to measure the judges' overall or "gestalt" perception of distortion of the message. The average interrater reliability for the two sets of judges' data was r=.75.

The actual measures of message distortion involved an item by item analysis by the two consensual of the message written by the subordinate in comparison to the stimulus situation. Each item in the stimulus situation was checked for its presence or absence in the subordinate's message. If the item was present, then it was judged for its favorability (favorable, unfavorable, or neutral) to the subordinate and its emphasis (underemphasized, overemphasized, or neither). Each addition in the subordinate's message (i.e., something in the message that was not present in the stimulus situation) was rated according to favorability. Proportions were computed to yield proportion of items deleted from the stimulus situation, proportion of favorable, unfavorable, and neutral items deleted from the stimulus situation, proportion of total additions in the message, and proportion of favorable, neutral and unfavorable items in the entire.

Data transformations were performed on frequency data (square root transformations) and on proportion date (arcsin transformations) according to suggestions by Winer (1971).

Since no company differences were found in the message distortion analyses, data were collapsed across companies for a 2 X 2 repeated measures Analysis of Variance for all message distortion measures.

Results.

Judged measures of distortion.

A main effect was found for judged additions to the stimulus situations. Judges perceived more additions to the messages in response to unfavorable stimulus situations than in response to favorable stimulus situations (F=5.61, df=1/61, $p<.02$).

A task relatedness by favorability interaction was found for judged deletions

($F=9.$ df-1/61, $p<.002$) and for overall or "Gestalt" distortion ($F=3.86$, $df=1/61$, $p<.05$). For task related matters judges perceived messages in response to unfavorable situations to have more deletions than messages in response to favorable situations; for non-task related matters judges perceived messages in response to favorable situations to have more deletions than messages in response to unfavorable situations (see figure 1). For task related matters judges perceived messages in response to unfavorable situations to be more distorted than messages in response to favorable situations; for non-task related matters judges perceived messages in response to favorable situations to be more distorted than messages in response to unfavorable situations (see figure 2).

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Insert figures 1 and 2 about here

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One interesting "non-finding" of this study was that no main effect was found (i.e., there were no significant effects) for the judges perception of the favorability of messages in response to both favorable and unfavorable situations ($F<1$, $df=1/61$, $p<.70$). That is, judges perceived messages in response to both favorable and unfavorable situations to be of statistically equal favorability.

Actual measures of distortion.

Main effects were found for proportion of additions in the messages favorable to the subordinate and proportion of the entire message unfavorable to the subordinate. Messages written in response to task related situations had a greater proportion of additions favorable to the subordinate than messages written in response to non-task related situations ($F=3.47$, $df=1/61$, $p<.06$). Messages written in response to task related situations has a smaller proportion of the entire message unfavorable to the subordinate than messages written in response to non-task related messages ($F=3.90$, $df=1/61$, $p<.05$).

A task relatedness by favorability interaction was found for deletions in the messages as compared to the original stimulus situations ($F=8.31$, $df=1/61$, $p<.01$). For task related matters there was a greater proportion of deletions in messages written in response to unfavorable stimulus situations than in messages written

in response to unfavorable stimulus situations than in messages written in response to favorable stimulus situations; for non-task related matters there was a greater proportion of deletions in messages written in response to favorable stimulus situations (see figure 3).

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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Discussion.

The hypothesis of this study that unfavorable situations would lead to greater distortion than would favorable situations was supported, but for the most part only in task related situations. In fact, for non-task related situations the exact opposite of the hypothesis was found in most cases.

That there was more distortion in messages written in response to task related situations can be viewed as being consistent with the theoretical basis of this study. It was posited that one of the main reasons for the distortion of information sent to the superior from the subordinate was the power of the superior to reward or punish the subordinate due to the nature of the status hierarchy. It is because of this power that the superior has over the subordinate that the subordinate tries to place himself in the most favorable light. This bias toward favorability can be seen by the fact that messages written from favorable and unfavorable stimulus situations did not differ in favorability as perceived by the judges, and by the fact that there were more judged additions to messages written in response to unfavorable than to favorable situations. While this biasing effect was consistent with the hypothesis of the study, it does not explain why task related matters should lead to greater distortion of messages. Perhaps it is in the area of task matters that the supervisor is probably seen as holding the greatest power over the subordinate and thus there is a greater effect on message distortion. It is, therefore, not too surprising that the distortion effect for unfavorable situations was most apparent for task related matters. This can be seen by the fact that messages written

from task related matters had more judged and actual deletions when the situation was unfavorable than when it was favorable and were judged as more "distorted" when the situation was unfavorable than when it was favorable.

The power of the superior over task related matters may even be seen in the findings that the task relatedness of the stimulus situation, in and of itself, also had an influence on the distortion of the messages. There were a greater proportion of additions favorable to the subordinate in messages written in response to task than to non-task related situations and there was a smaller proportion of the entire message that was unfavorable to the subordinate for task than for non-task related situations.

Since the supervisor probably has more power over the subordinate in task related than in non-task related matters, the subordinate should try to make himself look good in messages written about task related situations, and when the situation about which he is writing the message puts him in an unfavorable light, he is especially likely to distort that information to make himself look good, or at least to make sure that he does not look as bad as he could.

It may be surprising that there was not as much distortion for non-task related matters for messages in response to unfavorable situations, since the superior probably does not have the same power over the subordinate that he has in task related matters. What is surprising is that there was even less distortion in many cases for messages written in response to unfavorable than favorable situations for non-task related matters.

One possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that it may be a real-life example of the pratfall effect (Aronson, Willerman & Floyd, 1966; and Kieler & Goldberg, 1968). That is, one way to increase credibility is to show that you are human my making mistakes. In an organizational setting this pratfall is much safer in non-task situations where the superior probably does not have as much power over the subordinate than in task related situations where the superior is probably perceived as having such power. Therefore, one

can admit to mistakes more readily for non-task related situations (and possibly even point out these mistakes as a way of showing that one is just another person), thus increasing credibility. It is also possible that to always put oneself in a favorable light would decrease credibility, since it is not all together believable that a person is always right and is always doing everything well and correctly. To make a mistake and put oneself in an unfavorable light once in awhile will, thus, possibly increase the credibility to admit to and even point out mistakes is, however, much safer in non-task related situations than in task related situations.

This study has revealed some very expected and some very surprising findings concerning message distortion. Much more research is needed to clarify and expand on the findings of this study, especially the task relatedness by favorability interactions that were found. Also, the theoretical relationship that was posited here is a post hoc one. Research needs to be undertaken to test whether the "pratfall effect" is indeed a viable explanation for the results of this study. Since message distortion is such a pervasive aspect of human communication, especially in organizational settings, we should attempt to discover those variables that affect distortion, and to expand the theoretical framework for message distortion in organizations.

Figure 1. Task relatedness by Favorability interaction for judged deletion from stimulus situations.

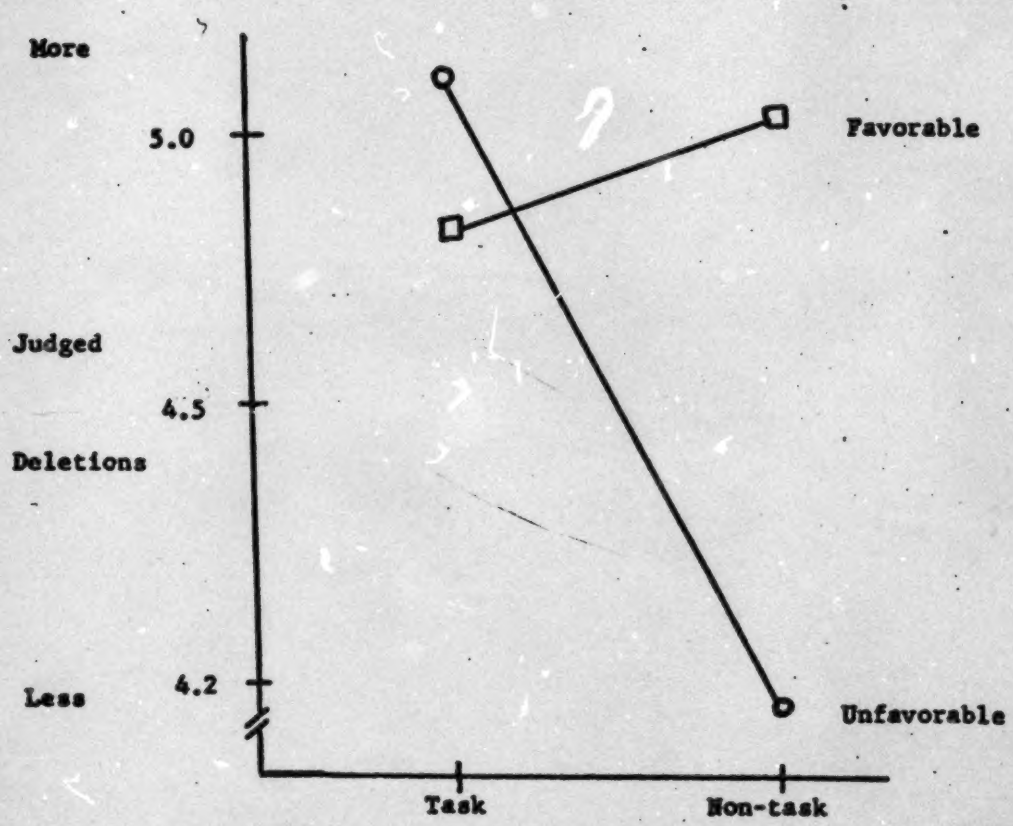


Figure 2. Task relatedness by Favorability interaction for judged "Gestalt" distortion of the subordinates' messages.

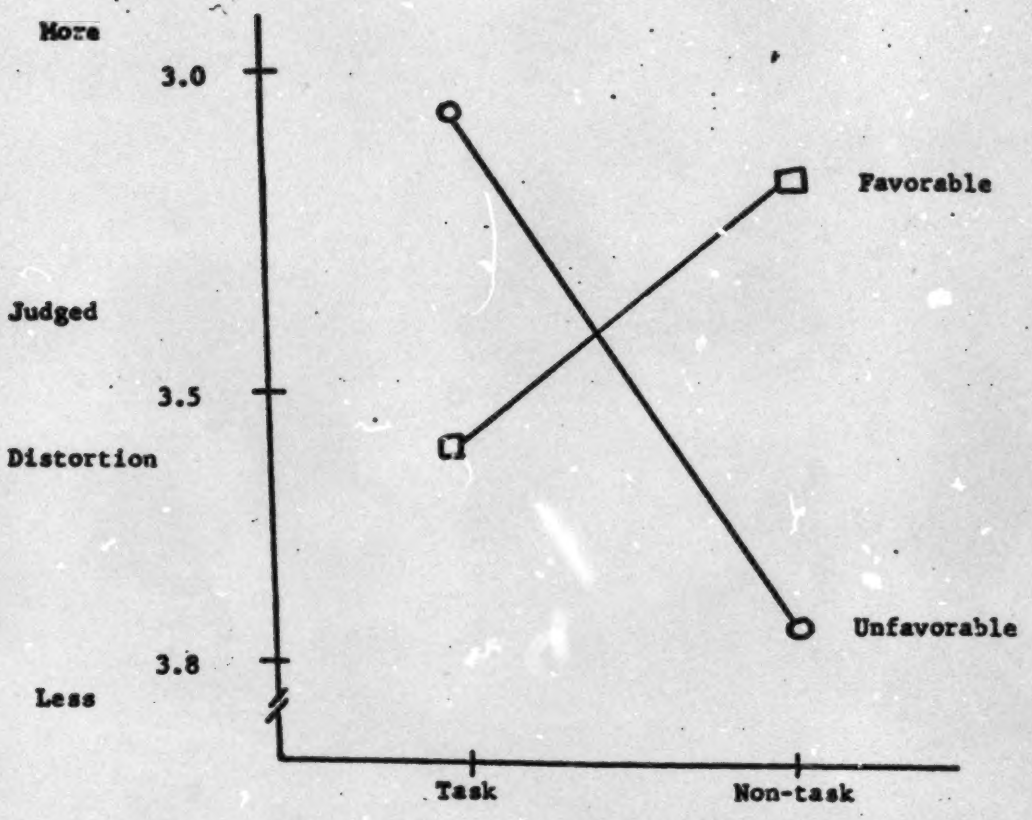
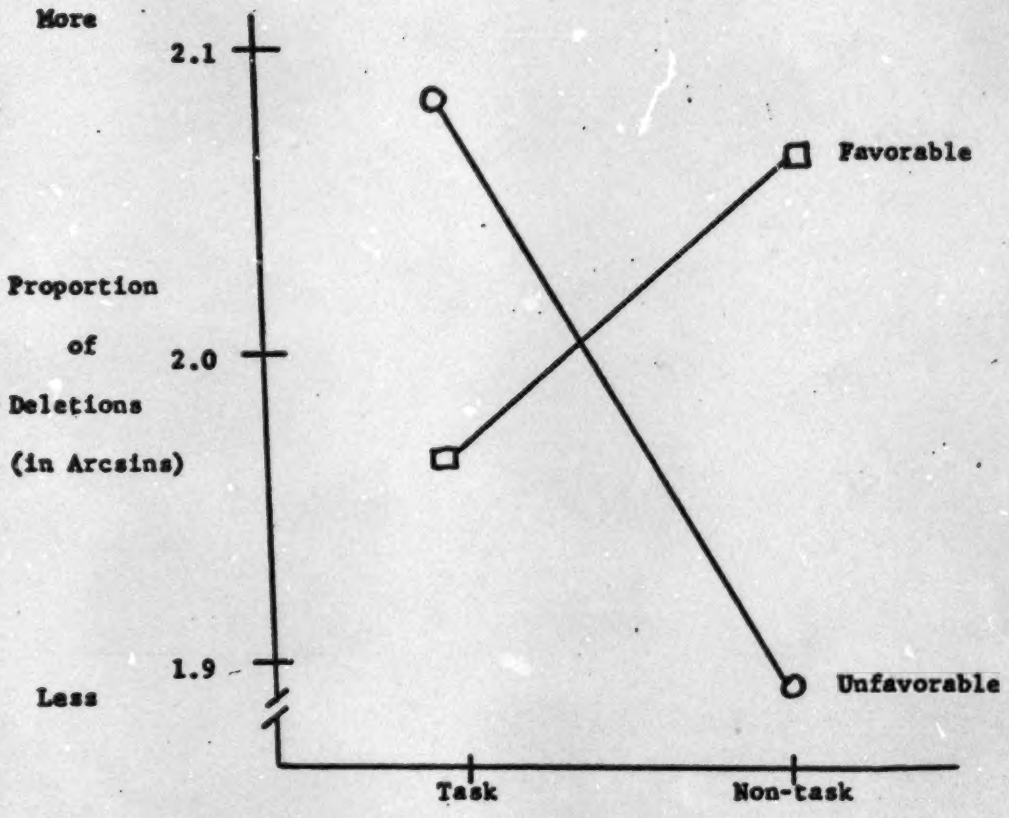


Figure 3. Task relatedness by Favorability interaction for actual proportion of deletions from stimulus situations.



FOOTNOTES

[1] Data for this study were collected as part of the author's Ph.D. dissertation, W. Charles Redding, major professor. The author is also indebted to the following people for their unselfish assistance in this research: Mark L. Knapp, Ralph Webb, Gustav Friedrich, Robert Pritchard, Debby Krivonos, and Lou Cusella.

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